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ABSTRACT

Recent concern for the quality of education has placed pressure on school administrators to assess and upgrade the competency of their teaching staff. No simple formula exists for measuring teacher competency, however, nor are any new methods guaranteed to improve the quality of instruction. Nevertheless, through a combination of clinical supervision, teacher evaluation, inservice education, incentive programs, and instructional leadership, administrators can upgrade the competency of their staff and increase the likelihood of attracting and retaining competent and devoted professionals in their classrooms. (TE)

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TEACHER COMPETENCY: WHAT ADMINISTRATORS CAN DO

Recent concern for the quality of education has placed pressure on school administrators to assess and upgrade the competency of their teaching staff. No simple formula exists for measuring teacher competency, however, nor are any new methods guaranteed to improve the quality of instruction.

Nevertheless, through a combination of clinical supervision, teacher evaluation, and inservice education on one hand and incentive programs coupled with innovative instructional leadership on the other, administrators can increase the likelihood of attracting and retaining competent and devoted professionals in their classrooms.

What is a competent teacher?

Prior to instituting minimum standards of competency or assessing their teaching staff, administrators must carefully define competency. According to Allen Pearson, three judgments must be made to identify a person as a competent teacher: (1) What standards must a teacher meet to teach satisfactorily rather than minimally? (2) What skills are required in general for a person to perform at this level? and (3) Does the person in question have these requisite skills? The first of these, of course, is the most controversial, but all three involve subjective value-based judgments of how teachers and students should interact and of the end to which teaching is a means.

Researchers, who must rely on measurable outcomes, tend to define effective teachers as those whose students show statistically significant gains on reading and mathematics achievement tests. The researchers then identify teaching behaviors correlated with these gains. On this basis, the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study in California (cited by Beatrice Gudridge) developed a framework of five interrelated skills essential to successful teaching: (1) diagnosis (knowledge of subject matter combined with awareness of differences among students as a foundation for instructional planning); (2) prescription (adapting the instructional program to the student's level of skill); (3) presentation (clarifying learning objectives and interrelating them); (4) monitoring (keeping track of all students' progress); and (5) feedback (rewarding achievement, identifying deficiencies, and providing remedial attention). The latter, according to the study, has the strongest and most consistent positive relation to student achievement.

Other, more subjective qualities have been associated with effective teaching. These include positive expectations, inspirational leadership, and a wide repertoire of teaching skills and motivational techniques (since no one instructional technique or model will work with all students all the time). An essential attribute of good teaching is therefore sound judgment and good sense--qualities that cannot be reduced to finite, measurable skills. Established criteria for teacher competency can at best delineate what is necessary, but not sufficient, for effective teaching.

How should the competency of prospective teachers be assessed?

Until recently, the assumption has been that state certification requirements, as implemented by colleges of education, were sufficient to ensure an adequate level of teacher competency. In response to widely publicized reports of teachers deficient in basic skills, two more rigorous methods of screening prospective teachers have been proposed: standardized tests for teachers and internship programs (or probationary appointments).

Proponents of teacher testing draw an analogy between education and other professions such as law or medicine to suggest that entrance examinations are an appropriate way to maintain professional standards, to weed out incompetent teachers, and to attract higher quality applicants. Detractors question the validity of this analogy, arguing that paper-and-pencil tests of knowledge have no significant relationship to classroom effectiveness.

Opponents of teacher testing also question whether it will lead to higher quality applicants. As Ronald Hyman has observed, people are attracted to a given field by improved working conditions and higher salaries--not simply by more stringent entrance requirements. If such tests are to be adopted, most educators maintain that they should be criterion-referenced and validated against performance requirements, rather than against training programs.

Arbitrary cutoff scores should be avoided, as Carlton Stedman maintains, because they preclude professional judgment as part of the overall evaluation process. Teacher tests cannot assess aptitude, interests, attitudes, motivation, maturity, or other subjective criteria for effective teaching.

What policies are conducive to improving teacher competency?

According to Russell A. Joki, school boards can help improve the quality of teaching by writing strong, clear policies on administrative

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accountability (including provisions for instructional leadership); on teacher recruitment, supervision, and evaluation; on an instructional model keyed to specific objectives; and on inservice training for administrators and teachers. According to Joki, veteran educator George Redfern suggests that superintendents provide principals with clerical assistance to give more time for classroom observation, clinical supervision, demonstration teaching, and staff development.

Teacher evaluation, in addition to its customary function of establishing a basis for promotion, retention, or dismissal of teachers, can also be a valuable tool for improving instructional effectiveness. A good evaluation program, according to Redfern, should emerge from the cooperative efforts of teachers and their evaluators in identifying broad areas of responsibility and specific objectives. Thus teachers will "own" an evaluation program, rather than having one arbitrarily imposed.

Besides monitoring teacher performance, a specific objective of teacher evaluation, according to Jim Sweeney and Richard Manatt, should be to set measurable job improvement targets. Once targets are set, the principal and teacher work out a specific plan of action within a given time frame, and then review the teacher's progress in conference. Such clinical supervision promotes a school climate in which continuous improvement becomes an essential part of every teacher's job.

In addition to setting and clarifying expectations, administrators can also employ incentives to induce teachers to excel in their profession. These include merit pay plans, career options (including career ladders), enhanced professional responsibilities (for example, master teacher plans), nonmonetary recognition such as annual awards, and improved working conditions.

What kinds of inservice education and teacher development programs are most effective in improving teacher competency?

A survey of 97 studies of inservice education by Gordon Lawrence (cited by Gudridge) revealed that teachers benefit most from inservice programs (1) when they are school-based rather than college-based; (2) when they emphasize self-instruction by teachers, placing them in an active rather than passive role; (3) when they emphasize demonstrations, supervised trials, and feedback; (4) when they encourage teachers to provide mutual assistance rather than working alone; (5) when they are part of an integrated staff development plan rather than a "one-shot" deal; and (6) when they permit teachers to choose goals and activities in accordance with their own needs. The common thread in these findings is that inservice programs are most effective when they are responsive to teachers' immediate practical needs.

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